

Chair's Report 2011 – 2012

This has definitely been a busy year for the outgoing National Executive Committee and a testing time for teachers.

Late last year my school was put into Special Measures. As the profiles of English and Maths as discreet subject areas increased, our Headteacher struggled to maintain a creative curriculum, which seems to be a national issue. As an AST in Creativity, my role has changed dramatically over the past couple of years. Where as before I was mostly working with Headteachers to help shape their curriculums, the majority of my time is now given up to working with colleagues to improve attainment in the core subjects. I have tried to encourage the use of drama throughout this but these teachers, like their senior leaders, are often under immense pressure and are reluctant to stray from a regimented sit down lesson.

This has been the most challenging couple of years of my career but there have been some positives. During the Ofsted inspection, my lesson was a triumph – with pupils taking up the roles of Victorian mill working children, following a tragic accident. The children produced some breathtaking work that really moved the inspector. The subsequent HMI inspector was also pleased with the use of drama within my classroom and suggested I work with other staff in school.

I know many of you are facing similar challenges in your settings and this is why our Association's voice is more crucial than ever; to help teachers continue using what they believe in. We have been struggling to get members to Conference, which reflects the perceived importance of drama by senior leaders, or their inability to find funding for it. But this is the perfect time to show others the power of our subject and remind ourselves that what we are doing is right.

Before the NEC could begin to move forwards this year, our Treasurer, Liam Harris had the mammoth task of straightening out the accounts. Liam has done an amazing job all year and needs to be applauded for going above and beyond the call of duty, many times. As you are aware, the accounts are now more streamlined and we have more control, due to Internet banking. I now recommend that the incoming Committee organise a fundraising event to strengthen funds to give us more freedom to plan Conference further in advance and regional events throughout the year. This is one of the reasons we are proposing (Motion Fifteen) to add a Charity Officer to the NEC to explore all possible avenues of funding.

The Association also has Public Liability now, so we are covered at all meetings.

I would also like to suggest that we become paperless wherever possible, not only to be more environmentally friendly, but to save funds on postage and printing. Members who wish to receive paper copies could happily opt out. I propose that the incoming NEC sends out an agreement electronically and anyone who doesn't respond still automatically receives paper versions; this will of course not include our Journal.

As proposed in the second motion at last year's AGM, we held an EGM, at the beginning of the year, to discuss the future of the Association. This actually turned into two days because we had so much to talk about. Both EGMs were incredibly valuable, particularly for those of us who are newer to the Association. Personally, it helped me appreciate all the work that has been put in by previous members, both here and abroad. It also inspired the NEC to focus on the future, distant and immediate. It was at the first that a name change was suggested, during rich and frank discussion. We also revisited the question of whether members receive enough for their money; I suggest this is explored further by the incoming NEC, and members have an opportunity to put forward suggestions. It was a pleasure to be involved with both EGMs, as it was a reminder of how much our members care about our Association.

Following the call at last year's AGM to re-examine the role of international members, the NEC has revisited the constitution as a whole and are making a number of proposals. Some of these are simply to tidy it up. However, I would like to draw your attention to Motion One, where we suggest the change of name to the National Association for Learning Through Drama. As stated earlier, this was raised at the first EGM. The NEC feels that the new name reflects the changing face of the Association, as some practitioners, particularly Primary colleagues, feel it presently caters for drama teachers specifically. The name also reiterates how we promote the use of drama through the whole curriculum and not just as a discrete subject. As a Primary School teacher, this is more relevant than ever, as the new draft curriculum does not recognise drama in its own right at all. So we need a name that clearly shows teachers who they can turn to for support and training.

This also draws me to Motion Eight where we would like to insert 'To actively engage in the shaping of educational policy and decision-making: regionally, nationally and internationally' into the constitution, under our objectives. Many of you are already incredibly proactive but we feel that it needs to be inserted to remind all members, particularly the NEC, of the Association's historical opposition to some major educational reform, and our obligation to keep speaking up for drama in education, which in turn also increases our communal voice and profile. The newly printed special issue of Journal, The History of NATD speaks in detail about the major

political battles of the past and how members fought hard to voice NATD's opposition.

As proposed in Motion 4 at last year's AGM, members have now been given the opportunity to opt out of the increased £10 donation to the Tony Grady and Mary Simpson funds. The first year of student membership is still free. We now need to examine how to retain these younger members into their second year.

Membership has to be a key focus for the coming year. Also proposed in Motion Fifteen, we have discussed the need for a Student Liaison to attend university fairs and give us a presence at other events, as we need to expand our numbers. This role would be additional to the current Membership Officer. Due to our new website, Facebook and Twitter accounts, we have had more new interest. We now need to translate that interest into delegates at Conference and Association members. Again, funding would help, as carefully selected mailshots could assist with both.

After the sad passing of our President, Dorothy Heathcote, last year, the NEC has also addressed the need for a successor. In Motion 18 we have outlined the remit and propose that Luke Abbott be invited to take up the role. Following consultation with members for nominations, Luke was the obvious and unanimous choice. As a major supporter of the NATD, I am sure you will agree that he is the right person to take up the reins of his predecessor and lead the Association during these testing times.

Motion 19 also outlines a remit for the future trustees. In the past, these roles have been filled by NEC members, but we felt this was inappropriate. Therefore, the NEC researched the roles of trustees, through the Charities Commission, and asks for the power to select four to five suitable candidates, who will oversee the running of the charity and ensure everything is in keeping with Charity law.

There are many people who have worked incredibly hard all year, particularly in the run up to Conference. In particular, I would like to thank Kirsty Fechter at Kingstone School, who has undertaken all our administration efficiently all year, in sometimes trying conditions, as the school closed down and amalgamated with another. The new Headteacher has agreed that we can retain Kirsty's services for the immediate future, so hopefully this will continue, as Kirsty is truly invaluable. If not, this is another potential funding issue for the new NEC, and Association.

Our Journal Committee has worked harder than ever this year to produce five publications, of which we can all be very proud: I am sure you will agree that the Dorothy Heathcote Special Issue and the reissue of her 'The Fight For Drama – The Fight For Education' keynote were fitting tributes; I have already mentioned 'The History of NATD'; and of course there were issues 28:1 and 28:2 – both of which were full of the usual thought-provoking articles. I would like to thank them all.

I particularly enjoyed reading past Chair's reflections in the history edition: very insightful. If you have not yet received your copy, you shall be doing so at Conference, and it will also be published on the website. It really shows how NATD has survived turbulent times before and it inspired me to keep fighting our own current battles. In the opening of Sorrel Oates' piece, she describes a time when the Association was "barely solvent" and NATD was on the brink of possible closure. Sorrel subsequently talks about how they turned things around, which gave me hope, as well as inspiration. As Paul Gibbins once said to me, the Chair's job is a lonely one, particularly in the run up to Conference, and reading the struggles of others made me feel a little less lonely during this anxious time.

Sorrel also eloquently discusses the purpose of Conference, which if I stay on the NEC, will influence how I plan in the future. In fact all the Chairs' varied descriptions of how conferences were instigated and planned now makes more sense as to where a starting point comes from and develops into a meaningful learning experience. As outlined in Guy Williams' account, sometimes it was key World events that helped shape the context for Conference, something I will be more aware of in future.

The Journal also gave me another opportunity to get more acquainted with some of the key people associated with NATD over the years, as I read about their tireless work and groundbreaking contributions. It was very humbling and again reminded me of the legacy we have to uphold and do justice to, at home and internationally.

I would like to say a major thank you to the outgoing NEC. As in past years, they have been a truly dedicated and hardworking group of people. We have had new members, who have ended up with major tasks and given their all. So I hope there are going to be more people looking to join the NEC for the upcoming year and bring fresh perspectives and insight.

I am sure there are still testing times ahead: the fight for drama, particularly in our Primary settings has only just begun. And as the Government's thoughts start moving towards election time, there will be yet more goal post moving, at the cost of our children's wellbeing. We feel Conference should empower people to stay focussed on that child-centred curriculum: as the title suggests, it is about creating outstanding learning opportunities. Finally, as Maria Gee expressed in her Chair's reflection, at this time we must all remember what Dorothy taught us, our obligation is primarily to the children and any other "must always be a secondary concern".

Ruth Saxton
Chair of NATD
30th September 2012